

21.04.20

2 Deputy M.R. Higgins of St. Helier of the Minister for External Relations regarding French fishing boats (OQ.101/2021):

Will the Minister update Members on his discussions with both the French and European Union authorities on the access by French fishing boats to Jersey waters and Jersey fishermen's access to French ports and markets; and state whether it is his assessment that the letter and spirit of the agreements are being met by all parties?

Senator I.J. Gorst (The Minister for External Relations):

I have had several meetings, including with the French Minister of the Sea, the E.U. (European Union) commissioner with responsibility for fishing policy and recently met with the presidents of La Manche and Normandy and due to meet with regional contacts in Brittany this week. I am expecting a further meeting with the E.U. commissioner in the coming days. While terms of the Trade and Co-operation Agreement are clear, returning access and control of the Island's territorial waters to Jersey authorities, there have been a number of implementation issues to work through. I am of course aware of reports of over fishing in Jersey waters and the suggestion that French boats are taking advantage of Jersey's amnesty. However, I understand from the marine resources team that the fishing was legal and was not dramatically different from normal levels for this time of year.

3.2.1 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Can the Minister tell us of the nature of those talks and whether the issues that he has raised are being taken seriously by those authorities, for example the access to the French markets, and not only in terms of boats coming into our waters but our access by our fishermen to European markets and ports?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Of course the Deputy knows that when the United Kingdom left the European Union Jersey, by extension, became a third country and therefore access to all European markets for goods, of which fish is an extremely important element of our export, became much more complicated, much more bureaucratic and, as I indicated, there have been difficulties for our fishermen landing directly into French ports. I have been absolutely clear in all of my conversations, both at European Union level with the British Government and also with the French Government and French regional politicians that we would like them to ensure that those bureaucratic measures are alleviated as much as possible. It is fair to say that that has continued to be difficult. It has also been difficult for wholesalers to land in St. Malo, although my understanding and advice again from those directly involved and from marine resources, is that the issues in St. Malo have been somewhat alleviated. When it comes to dealing with the licences, the Deputy will be aware of the amnesty agreed by the Minister for the Environment for vessels with V.M.S. (vessel monitoring system) that amnesty comes to an end at the end of April, and this Assembly will be asked during this sitting to agree legislation to allow licences to be issued and we will continue then to work together with the European Union on evidence for smaller vessels.

3.2.2 Connétable M.K. Jackson of St. Brelade:

Would the Minister agree that the ability of the Minister for the Environment to fairly condition French fishing vessel licences will ensure the sustainability of our waters for future generations?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

I think we are all, in this Assembly, agree, and in the wider community, that our waters must be fished sustainably and this gives rise to some of the concerns that some Jersey fishermen have had about the number of licences previously issued under the Bay of Grainville agreement and of course the larger vessels, which have been highlighted over the last number of days. But the Trade and Co-operation Agreement will allow the Jersey Minister for the Environment to issue licences in a sustainable manner with sustainability at the heart of those issuing, as long as it is done on a non-discriminatory basis and using the best evidence and data available.

3.2.3 Deputy M.R. Higgins:

Going back to the Minister's answer, can he tell me what assurances he received from the French and E.U. representatives he has been talking to and, in particular, what positive steps they have taken to do to alleviate the problems that our fishermen are facing?

Senator I.J. Gorst:

Of course the Deputy knows that the problems we are facing arise out of the Brexit situation itself, i.e. becoming a third country for access of goods into the European market. We have asked for a reasonable approach to be taken, as we have taken in extending the amnesty. The concern of course on regard to our French colleagues is that the number of licences that Jersey might issue and any measures around sustainability that might be taken into the future of course we have spoken to our colleagues in La Manche. They would like to implement a border inspection post at La Manche. We fully support that but the Deputy can see that from their position they are saying that until licences have been issued there can be very little, if any, progress on the border inspection post; that is why we are having to rely on the inspection post at St. Malo. It is important that we continue to maintain positive relationships and continue to talk as we get through the end of the initial amnesty and the final 2 months of the amnesty for smaller vessels. Because if we stop talking, if we behave in an unco-operative manner, these issues will continue.